Sociology 4099: Victimology

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Overheads Week 5: Victim Subcultures:

This week we will review the following interrelated topics:

(1) The organizational structure of victim subcultures;
(2) The impact of support organizations on feelings of deviance/ depression;
(3) The impact of support organizations on victim identity.

(1) Frank J. Weed: The organizational structure of victim subcultures:

* The crime victim movement embraces (1) Political advocacy
  (2) Social service

* These interrelate symbiotically

* 1990-91 Survey of U.S. crime victim organizations

* Weed outlines six topics emerging from these data, beginning with:

  (i) Organizational Features

* Public vs. private distinction:

  Public (e.g. victim/witness programs)
  Private (e.g. crisis centres/shelters)

* Public agencies:

  Government money (often at risk) Detailed internal policies
  More bureaucratic Heavy caseload
  Formal procedures Serve wider interests (CJS)
* Private agencies:

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<tr>
<th>Mixed funding</th>
<th>Porous boundaries</th>
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<tr>
<td>Less bureaucratic</td>
<td>Rely on volunteers/adaptability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some formal procedures</td>
<td>Serve interest of constituents</td>
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(ii) Organizational Shaping of Victim’s Problem:

* Concept of victim open to multiple definitions

* Organizations define them to fit pre-existing goals / functions

* Actions taken in response vary on “relevant” aspects of “victim problem”

* Three basic approaches:
  
  (a) Assisting victim as CJS witness
  (b) Assisting victim as client suffering psychological harm
  (c) Assisting victim to advocate for changes

* Four basic types of service combine these in varying degrees:
  
  (a) Victim/Witness programs
  (b) Victim advocacy organizations
  (c) Women’s centres/ shelters
  (d) Rape crisis/ sexual assault agencies

* Survey results coalesce around these four types

(iii) The Perception of a Needy Victim:

* All services are premised on idea of victim’s needs requiring outside help:
  
  - Suffering because of acts of offender
  - Suffering further because of CJS
* Not seen as:

  - Private problem
  - To be dealt with on own
  (i.e. many victims who don’t report crimes)

* Survey results:

  - Support above characterization
  - Contrast with studies showing comparable recovery without services

(iv) Belief Systems of Service Providers:

* Coalesce around broad need of increased status for victims in CJS

* No ready consensus on more specific policies / reforms

(v) Crime Victim Work: A New Occupation:

* Victim service = a new career:

  - Relatively stable funding for professional agencies
  - Socialization to shared knowledge base
  - Shared belief system

* Demographic characteristics (survey):

  - Middle-aged women
  - Middle-class background
  - Average 6.5 years experience
  - 40+ hour week
  - 2/3 college graduates
  - 37% graduate/professional education
  - Relatively high incidence of prior victimization
  - Claim to direct experience/ moral authority
(vi) Local-National Linkages:

* Local organization’s relationship to national umbrella organizations

  - Specialized (MADD; POMC; NCADV)
  - General (NOVA; NVC)

* Survey responses:

  - General umbrella organizations most prominent across board
  - Specialized local organizations linked more to specialized national agencies

**Conclusion:**

* Differences in organization = differences in conceptualization

* Consensus victims needy often self justification

* Victim’s rights an ideal, but no consensus on specifics

* Victim services = new career for specific group

* Local-national links vary with organization

(2) Coates and Winston: Counteracting the Deviance of Depression: Peer Support Groups for Victims:

* People under stress want to know if reactions:

  - “Normal” (to be expected)
  - “Deviant”

* Victims can compare reactions to:

  - Friends/ family (often deviant)
- Societal standards (deviant)
- Other victims (rarely encounter)

* Implication of deviance:

  - May transform unhappiness into depression
  - May be mitigated by positive validation of similar victims
  - Need research focus on peer support groups

* Factors potentially affecting victim’s experiences:

  - Comfort in sharing feelings vs. usual social niceties
  - Whether feelings validated or seen as different than group
  - Validation stabilizing vs. trading one deviant identity for another

* Limited prior research, so study initiated of 63 sex assault centres:

  - Staff reported 92.5% of groups successful
  - Only 20% reported any participants negatively affected

* Support groups also run by researchers to check feelings of self-deviance:

  - Drop in perceived self-deviance
  - Some reported alleviation of clinical condition
  - Caution that data limited

* Opposite hypothesis: do support groups increase deviance/ depression:

  Factors:

  - Coming to feel sadness/anxiety normal and appropriate
  - Increase in unpleasant feelings
  - Downward spiral

* Prior research limited/ inconsistent
* Groups with professional leaders help overcome depression

* Little evidence at time of downward spiral

* Coates and Winston conclude (on limited evidence):
  - Participation in peer support groups helps victims feel less deviant
  - Participation confers no special advantage in overcoming depression
  - Neither harmful nor particularly helpful to victims
  - Positive effects likely cancelled out by simultaneous negative effects
  - More research needed to better identify positive/negative dynamics

(3) J.S. Kenney: Observations of a Victim Support/Advocacy Group:

* I investigated a victim support group during 1999-2000

* This included observations and interviews involving:
  - 12 victims
  - 11 support volunteers/ staff

* This group was:
  - Privately run
  - Focused on a particular type of victimization
  - Combined support and advocacy functions
  - Operated largely through volunteers

* Issue: how do encounters impact client’s victim identity?

* Group exhibited tension between:
  - Attempts to avoid increasing victim identity
  - Inadvertent ways it was encouraged

* Manifested in variety of ways (i-v)
(i) Training:

- Some volunteers take training to appropriately support victims
- Others not trained, or screened out
- Untrained supporters negating trained ones:
  No boundaries
  Emphasizing “this was my experience, and it will be yours”

(ii) Inconsistent Application of Training:

* Despite training, some support staff:
  -Asked leading questions
  -Made suggestions
  -Used own experiences as examples
  -Distributed pamphlets with implicit victim characterizations
  -Inadvertently encouraged self-fulfilling prophecies

* While claiming that clients “already saw selves as victims,” not always so

(iii) Passing Personal Experience/ Inappropriate Advice:

* Two sides to this issue:

* Upside:
  -More personal touch
  -Encouraged purpose
  -Understanding/insight
  -Facilitated learning to cope/ take control

* Downside:
  -Extensive focus on offender/ crime
  -Focus on negative aspects of own/ other’s case
- Other’s upset triggering one’s own
- Difficultly separating own pain from others
- Well meaning, but inappropriate advice
- Keeping wound open
- People leave/ take away negative experience

(iv) Victim/ Non-Victim Conflict:

* On one hand, dual membership provides “balance”

* On other hand, “hierarchy of victims” encourages conflict
  
  - Status based on victim status
  - Encouraged externally and internally
  - “Professional victims” (learning experience vs. claim to fame)
  - Non-victim members drawn into dynamic (“Victims by association”)
  - Fought out over leadership positions/ membership/ influence

(v) Victim-Victim Conflict:

* Hierarchy of victims encourages conflict:
  
  - Over status
  - Claims of “revictimization” over favoritism in awards of:
    
    Programs
    Training
    Committee positions
    Perks vs. “dirty jobs”

* Classic examples of Holstein and Miller’s (1990) “victim contests”

* Such a dynamic does nothing to inhibit the victim identity
Conclusion:

* While attempting to limit encouragement of victim identity, this support group does so in the following ways:

(1) Training some support volunteers, but not others;
(2) Inconsistent application of training provided;
(3) Inappropriate advice/ triggering upset;
(4) Victim / non-victim conflict;
(5) Victim/ victim conflict.

* New clients encountering such dynamics may have difficulty avoiding victim identity